

Duxbury At the Turn of the Century

By CECIL ATWATER

In 1900, the Police Department could hardly be called a department. There were 3 constables elected by the voters and reported individually to the selectmen. As automobiles increased in numbers, the need for more and more police grew rapidly. Retired Chief James O'Neil tells me that the early police, using a stop-watch, set a trap for cars on Tremont St. 30 miles per hour was the speed limit for the open road. Today, we have an efficient, well trained police department with a fleet of modern automobiles and housed in an excellent new station house on Route 14.

I propose that we make a detailed survey of Washington St. as it was in 1900. Let's start with the area near the flagpole and Cable Office. This was known as "Town Square" and "the Village." There were many small businesses: Henry Briggs' livery stable, Charles Peterson's plumbing and tin shop, Thomas Hutchinson's boat shop, E. C. Chandler house painter, the Evans boot and shoe repair shop, Bailey's blacksmith shop, Tony Lucas's barbershop and an early garage operated by Jack Washburn.

This Society's former building was known as the Union Store, selling groceries.

In the rear of these buildings was an abandoned bowling alley. Across Blue Fish River still stands Fire House No. 1.

Across the street was the Joshua Smith harness shop. The Cable Office, now an attractive home, operated at the terminal of a cable from France. An early First National store supplanted the tin shop. This was not an attractive business center as many of the buildings were in poor repair and it is just as well that it has been replaced by a charming residential intersection. And now we come to the village drugstore, originally opened by Nelson Stetson and succeeded in 1907 by Paul Peterson. Across the street from it was the Duxbury post office, now a private home.

What we now call Snug Harbor (the name is of recent origin) was in large part occupied by the extensive yards, sheds and wharves of the Duxbury Coal and Lumber Co. A few stores were located there including Sweetser & Arnold (now called "Sweetser's") and the Josselyn Periodical store, now out of business. I also recall a blacksmith shop.

Further along on Washington St., shortly before reaching Surplus St., was the Peterson Grocery Store,

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later converted by Walter Prince into his present residence. Hall's Corner was almost wholly residential in those days. A grocery store was operated first by George Stetson and about 1900 by a Mr. and Mrs. White. It also housed the South Duxbury Post Office. The Cushing boarding and livery stable later became the Cushing Garage. Around the corner on Washington St. was a blacksmith shop. Scattered around town were a number of family stores, and then of considerable importance was the old Ford Store on Tremont St., said to be the first department store in America. It burned down many years ago. We youngsters had fun wandering through its many rooms and seeing merchandise imported from the many lands. Grocery stores conducted their business differently than they do today. We now walk through aisles taking articles from shelves and assembling them in carts. In the old stores, we read from a list or handed it to the grocer and he assembled our purchases on the counter. In those days, many horse-drawn wagons visited the residential streets selling meats, fish and vegetables. These were the days before electric refrigerators. The iceman delivered right into the icebox. Many of you will remember the icehouse and the pond on which ice was cut near Island Creek. There was no question but what Duxbury merchants padded their prices when selling to summer people. My father once asked Mr. White what he did in the winter time when he could no longer soak the summer folks. He replied "In the winter, we try to soak each other, but its tarntion hard gain."

Duxbury homes for a long time used well water which was pumped by hand or by windmill. The windmills were noisy, especially when the wind blew hard and they sometimes played havoc with sleep. A man made a business of making weekly calls on homes that had windmills, applying oil and grease.

Newcomers to Duxbury are sometimes curious as to how Surplus St. got its name. It was originally a poorly constructed road that ran from Washington St. to Depot St. and was called Poverty Lane. Near the end of the lane on Depot St. was the town poorhouse. Before the turn of the century, the Federal Government distributed a large sum of money to the states and the states in turn distributed their share to the cities and towns. Duxbury used its allotment to rebuild Poverty Lane and because the money was in excess of anticipated revenue they gave the road a new name and called it Surplus St. I would like to tell you a little story involving the poorhouse.

There was a well to do family living on Washington St. that included in their household an elderly uncle or grand uncle. One day, the old man disappeared and stayed away overnight. A search was made and he was eventually found at the poorhouse. When his family called to take him home, he protested vigorously saying that all his friends were living at the poorhouse and he wanted to be with them. This was shocking to his affluent family, who didn't want it said that a relative of theirs was in the poorhouse. The old man, sad to say, had to bow to family pride.

Duxbury, as you know, has built a fine modern fire station on Tremont St. The new station takes the place of the present Station No. 1 at Blue Fish River and Station No. 2 at Hall's Corner which have served us for about 3-quarters of a century. Station No. 3 in North Duxbury was added in 1906. These stations were equipped with hand pumps each drawn by a single horse. A separate forest fire department was organized in 1900 largely through the influence of F. B. Knapp, owner of Powder Point School. It was not combined with the Duxbury Fire Department until 1961. Under the intelligent and dedicated leadership of Chief Butler, we now have a modern, efficient fire fighting department with powerful up-to-date equipment, an ambulance service for which many citizens of our town are profoundly grateful, and an underwater rescue team.

Back in those days, we had our Fourth of July parades, the same as now. The first one I saw was in 1899. Most of the Civil War veterans, about 15 or 20, were on foot with some riding in surreys and other horse-drawn vehicles. A few years later, Spanish War veterans predominated and the GAR men were all in carriages. One of the last to ride was my treasured friend, James Burgess, of whom I will speak later. We weren't sophisticated in those days, so we had no so-called "Duxbury Days."

Some individuals become so important to a town that they might be called institutions. I believe Duxbury had 2 such men who lived in the era of which I speak. I have in mind Dr. Nathaniel Noyes and Percy Walker. For many years Dr. Noyes was the chief protector of the

health of our community. He was a dedicated country doctor and was well loved for his devotion to his profession and to his patients. He answered calls day or night in the poorest weather conditions. A telephone call for help once came from the Gurnet. It was during the night in the middle of winter. A Northeaster was blowing. With his team of horses and a buggy, he crossed the big bridge and followed the road that went behind the dunes to the Gurnet. It was so cold that the Bay was partially frozen over. Dr. Noyes arrived at his destination, he took care of his patient and started back. He was very tired and he fell asleep. When he awoke, he found that he was on bay ice off the north end of Clark's Island. Ahead was open water. Turning the horses, he regained the road and eventually reached home.

Concerning Percy Walker, I feel secure in saying that he did more to safeguard and make possible the kind of town we have today than any other person. He wanted Duxbury to remain a rural community and not become merely a suburb of Boston. He fought for protective zoning laws and was a pioneer in the preservation of open spaces, some of which are now owned by this Society. I can recall that under his leadership as president, some of the meetings of the Society were rather dull but he had a saving sense of humor that often relieved any monotony. I was present at one annual meeting when he called for the treasurer's report which was followed by the auditor's report. The auditor stated simply that he had found the treasurer's accounts in good order. President Walker then made the comment "Well it's nice to know that Miss Gifford hasn't stolen any money from the Society this year."

The social life of the town revolved around Mattakesett Hall and the Clubhouse of the Duxbury Yacht Club. Mattakesett Hall still stands on Washington St. The DYC was organized in 1894. Its first clubhouse was more centrally located at the foot of Freeman Place off Washington St. When it was succeeded by the present clubhouse, it was moved to the property of Dr. Richard Cattell on Freeman Place and is now used as a garage. One of Duxbury's big events was the annual play of the Yacht Club held at Mattakesett Hall. Most of the town attended and there were several performances. One year a minstrel show was staged. I remember only this bit:

BONES: "Mr. Interlocutor, I done heard it's not safe to buy from Sweetser & Arnold."

INTERLOCUTOR: "How come Mr. Bones?"

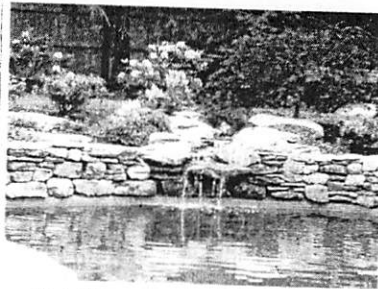
BONES: "I done heard Mr. Arnold sells pies n' things."

The Yacht Club's first commodore was William MacDowell, husband of Fanny Davenport, a famous actress of the period. Duxbury's 2 largest estates were the Wright mansion on St. George St., recently torn down to make room for a new schoolhouse, and what was known as the Fanny Davenport estate, off Washington St. just south of Shipyard Lane. The house still stands but it has been reduced somewhat in size and new homes have been erected on part of the grounds.

The popular racing craft in 1900 was the "knockabout." They had beautiful lines, had centerboards and were sloop rigged. They were ideal for racing in our Bay. The 18 footers were about 30 feet overall and the 15 footers were about 24 feet overall. I recall some of the yachts and their owners.

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Burt Goodspeed had a series of black boats called "Again." Arthur Train's green boats were called "Osprey," Frank Maxwell had a white boat, "Kittiwake V." Henry Hunt also raced, but I don't recall the name of his boat. I raced my 15 footer, "Bub." One of the Goodspeeds had a 15 footer "Sis." I think Harvey King's boat was called "Curlew."

I started racing in a catboat owned by Walter Amesbury and I was his crew. In 1905, we won the season's cup for our class and received it from Arthur Train, who was then commodore. Train Field was named for him. Walter Amesbury and I have maintained our friendship over these many years. He has a summer home at the foot of Longview Rd. Most of the yachts I have referred to, including my own, were built by Shiverick of Kingston. We raced in all kinds of weather. I remember one race when a northeaster was blowing. We shortened the mainsail to the last reef and carried a tiny storm jib. Races were held well into the fall. Parenthetically, may I say that I greatly admire our present day Duxbury sailors who comprise the Frostbite Fleet. A most delightful experience was pulling up to the yacht club float after racing on a cold wet day and sitting down to a big bowl of fish chowder served by the good ladies of the yacht club. Some of you may remember the weekly dances held at the old clubhouse. I was chairman of the dance committee for a year or 2. The lively spiel was current at that time.

Burgess Boatshop

Vivid in my memory is the old boatshop owned by James Burgess at the foot of Shipyard Lane. Incidentally, this street was originally called Somerville Ave. The name was so distasteful to the residents that my father got up a petition to have it called Shipyard Lane. The selectmen gave their approval. As a young man, Jim Burgess had been to sea on merchant ships. In his boatshop he built sailboats and dories, made repairs, painted them, hauled them out in the fall, stored them over the winter and put them in the water in the spring. He was the official handicapper of the Yacht Club. He lived with Mrs. Burgess in a white cottage at the corner of Josselyn Ave. After his death, the house was moved to a location on what is now called Partridge Rd. Inasmuch as sailing and things having to do with the sea were my consuming interest in those days, I spent much of my time, especially when the tide was out, at the boatshop. Jim Burgess was a friendly man and he generously assigned one end of his long work bench for use by my father and me. We kept our tools there and made articles of no real importance but it gave us an excuse for being there with some wonderful old timers, whose lives were forever related closely to the sea. Among them was Bill Facey who lived in a cabin in the rear of his respectable sisters' house on Washington St. The only room his sisters would allow him to enter was the kitchen. There was another regular employee whose name I think was Sam Windsor but I am not sure. Others filled in when additional help was needed. All those men had had sea experience and they enjoyed talking about it. Their language at times was rough, but I was entranced by their tales.